

One More One Last Chance

by AliasCWN

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The guards pulled the cell door open and pushed Sam Troy roughly inside. He stumbled on the uneven floor, scrambling to catch himself before he fell. The door clanged shut behind him. Spinning around, he watched as more German soldiers pushed Mark Hitchcock into the cell across the hall. They gave him a hard shove and let him fall heavily onto his face on the floor, the blood still flowing freely from the wound in his side.

"He needs a doctor!" Troy shouted at the guards.

They ignored him and locked the door as Hitchcock struggled to breathe through the pain.

"You can't leave him like that!" Troy pressed his face against the bars, trying to get their attention.

"You can help him Sargent."

A new voice echoed through the stone hallway. Troy turned his head to see a German officer walking toward him. The officer stopped in front of his cell and faced him.

"All you have to do is tell us where the others are. Your man will get a doctor." The tall Germans' smile was pure evil. He turned to look into the cell where Hitchcock lay curled up on the cold floor. "Your man will die without help Sargent. He doesn't look too well even now." The officer studied the wounded prisoner for a moment

before he turned back to Troy. "You can still save his life Sargent. Just tell me where we can find the others."

Troy shook his head. His gaze wandered back to his driver, wounded and bleeding.

"Very well Sargent. Perhaps your man will be more agreeable." The German motioned for the guards to open the cell door. They swung it open and stepped aside to let him step through. Two of the guards, rifles ready, followed him into the cell. Leaning over the barely conscious prisoner, the officer grabbed a handful of hair and turned the head until he could look into the boys' face. "Perhaps you want to live Private."

Hitchcock groaned painfully and tried to keep his eyes open long enough to answer the German. They were so heavy he was having trouble staying awake.

"Tell me where to find the others and I will get you a doctor. You don't need to die Private. Just answer my question."

Hitchcock tried to shake his head but the officer was holding it by his hair. He didn't have the strength to fight it. "Can't." He finally mumbled.

The officer leaned down to hear his breathless reply. His face darkened with rage as he realized what the American was saying. He released his hold on the young privates' hair and stood. "Very well Private. One less prisoner to guard." Turning on his heel he left the cell and didn't look back. "If you change your mind Sargent, just call a guard. Maybe you can still save him." He called over his shoulder.

The guards locked the cell door and followed their officer to the end of the hall and up the stairs.

"Hitch!...Hitch!"

The blond stirred but didn't answer.

"Hitch, you've got to get the bleeding stopped." Troy called repeatedly to his driver until Hitchcock finally responded.

"Sarge?"

"You're going to have to bandage that wound on your own Hitch. You've got to stop the bleeding!"

He watched as Hitchcock slowly rolled onto his back. The entire right side of the privates' shirt was soaked with blood. The bright red color was a clear indication that it hadn't clotted yet. The boy was still losing blood.

"Use your shirt to plug that hole. You're going to have to tear a piece off." Coaxing, pleading, demanding. Troy used every means at his disposal to keep the wounded private focused enough to follow his instructions.

Slowly, painfully, but eventually, the youth was able to tear a

corner off his shirt tail to push into the bullet hole. With a painful moan, he inserted the cloth. His entire body went rigid at the assault on his senses. The pain overwhelmed him and he gave in to the darkness.

Troy gripped the bars until his knuckles turned white as he watched his young friend fight to stay alive. He shook the bars with the strength of his anger to no avail. There was no way he could help, except with his voice, so he talked. He kept talking, hoping the sound of his voice would give the young blond strength, support, or at the very least, a sense of peace. Even after Hitchcock passed out, he continued to talk to him, just in case the boy could still hear him. He wouldn't, he couldn't leave him alone to die if there was anything at all he could do to help.

The young private moaned a few times but he didn't open his eyes. Troy was relieved to notice that the blood on his shirt was drying and no new blood was soaking the material or leaking onto the floor. Troy moved to his cot to sit down. He knew that Moffitt and Tully would come for them and he just prayed that they would get there in time. He could already see beads of sweat on his drivers' face as his fever climbed.

Footsteps on the stairs had him jumping to his feet. He moved to the front of the cell and twisted his head to try to look down the hall to see who was coming. Half a dozen guards came down the hall followed by the officer.

The officer stopped in front of Hitchcocks' cell and peered at him for a moment. Snapping an order, he stepped back. The guards opened the cell and went inside. One of them bent over Hitchcock and checked for a pulse. He reported to the officer who nodded before turning to Troy.

"You will have one last chance to save your man Sargent."

Troy shook his head, watching the other man warily.

"Very well. Your man has been condemned to death. He will be hung unless one of you talks." The officer waited to see how Troy would react.

"He's a prisoner of war. If you hang him it will be murder." Troy knew his argument was useless but he had to try. He stiffened as the guards pulled his driver up by his arms and dragged him from the cell.

"Your final chance." The German watched his reaction. "Very well." He sighed. "You can watch the execution from your window." The officer led the way along the hall, the guards dragging the unconscious prisoner they had condemned to die.

Troy rushed to the window and looked out. His heart sank as he saw the wooden gallows standing in the square. There was a commotion outside as the officer and his party left the building and made their way to the gallows. Hitch was still not showing any sign of being aware of his surroundings. The guards had to carry him up the steps. His hands were tied behind his back and the guards pulled him to his feet. Supporting his weight and holding him upright, water was thrown in his face. It took several tries to bring him around.

Mark Hitchcock shook his head to clear it then wished he hadn't. He found himself held upright on a platform above the ground with a noose dangling in front of his face. The German officer stood to one side watching him.

"This is your last chance Private. Tell me what I want to know."

Hitchcock stared at him stone faced. He tried to ignore the braided rope that was swinging in the breeze between them.

The officer returned his stare. His anger at the stubborn American before him was evident. With a curt wave and a forceful order he told his men to proceed. They stepped toward Hitch and slipped the noose over his head. One of them shifted the knot to fit just behind his ear before he tugged the loop snug.

Hitch never took his eyes off the officer. Determined not to let the German see his fear, he tried to summon a glare.

Sam Troy wanted to look away. He cursed silently under his breath. He gripped the bars, determined to stay with the young blond to the end. A sound in the hall drew his attention from the scene before him.

"Troy!" A hushed whisper.

"Jack, here!" Troy ran to the door. Frantic, he searched for Moffitt. The Brit ran down the hall toward his cell holding a ring of keys in his hand.

"Jack, they took Hitch!"

"I know." Moffitt replied, the stress making his voice rough. "Tully's out there. He'll do what he can, but we need to get out there." His fingers fumbled with the keys, trying to find the one that would open the door. After what seemed like an eternity to Troy, the tumblers clicked and the door opened. Moffitt handed Troy a spare machine gun and the two of them raced for the square.

"You Americans are very foolish." The officer smirked at his prisoner. "You would hang to save those who care nothing about you."

Hitch fought to stay awake. His side burned, making his vision blur and his body shake. He tried to respond to the officer. His mouth was so dry he couldn't speak at first. He licked his cracked lips and took a deep breath. The pain that resulted almost took him to his knees. Only the strong grip of the guards holding his arms kept him on his feet.

"You.." That one word took almost all his strength. With an effort, he tried again. "You would neverâ€¦understand." He paused to take a breath. "You don't knowâ€¦the meaningâ€¦of friendship. Friendship isn't saving someone...it's caring enough... to try." Hitch fought to finish his statement. "They do." His strength spent, he sagged into the hands holding him.

"Your friends didn't come to save you Private. They're going to let

you die." The officer puzzled over the ghost of a smile that crossed the young Americans' face. With a shrug he gave the order to continue. He glanced down to make sure that he was clear of the trap door. The guards holding the prisoner took a step away and prepared to release his arms. The executioner reached for the lever to release the drop away door.

The first shot took the executioner in the head. The officer watched in shock as the man fell from the gallows platform. He snapped out of his surprise and opened his mouth to start shouting orders. A bullet plowed into his chest and knocked all the air out of his lungs. The guards holding the prisoner released his arms and tried to escape down the steps. The American soldier racing up the steps mowed them down as he approached.

Tully, racing up the steps, found Hitch sagging in the grip of the noose around his neck. Pulling his long knife, he slashed the rope above his friends' head. With one arm, he caught the blondes' falling body. Tully frantically pulled on the knot, loosening the noose. He breathed a sigh of relief as he felt Hitch draw a deep breath. Throwing the blond over his shoulder in a firemans' carry, he rushed down the stairs.

Troy was firing at random, trying to create as much confusion as possible. The German reinforcements were on their way but they hadn't arrived yet. He emptied his clip and picked up another weapon from a dead German to continue his diversion. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tully running down the steps with Hitch over his shoulder. A German command car came barreling toward him and he took aim at the armored vehicle. Moffitt waved at him from the drivers' seat. Troy shifted his aim to fire at a German aiming at Moffitt. He ran for the car, jumping in as it rolled past. Moffitt spun the car around and started searching for Tully. Troy pointed at the two privates sheltered between two walls.

Tully swung his rifle sling over his shoulder and bent to pick up Hitches' limp body. As the command car pulled up next to them he gently placed his friend in the rear seat, taking the extra time to be careful. Troy and Moffitt kept up a constant string of fire to keep the Germans ducking for cover. Tully jumped in with a yell and unslung his own weapon.

In a final act of defiance, as the command car raced past the gallows, Tully tossed a grenade. He smiled with satisfaction as the wooden structure turned into a pile of splinters and firewood. He tossed another grenade at the gate to clear the way for the command car to leave the German compound. They raced for the open spaces of the desert and the faster jeeps.

Three days laterâ€¦

"I don't know how you guys did it, but thanks." Hitchcock was sprawled in his bed in an Allied hospital tent. In shock from loss of blood, weak and sick, he didn't remember any of the ride home.

Troy thought that that was a good thing. The road had been bumpy, and between the wound, the fever and the heat, it wouldn't have been a pleasant experience for their young friend.

"Hey Hitch."

>"Yeah?"<p>

"What did you say to that Kraut there toward the end? His face got all red and he looked ready to explode."

Hitch thought for a minute, trying to remember, and then shrugged. "All I remember saying was that he didn't know the meaning of friendship. I told him that you guys did."

Troy watched the blonds eyes droop with exhaustion. He thought about the German giving him one last chance to save his driver. Whatever else happened, he knew he was grateful for this one more chance.

"Friendship is giving the other guy what he needs even when you don't want to."

The others looked at him with questions in their eyes.

"I know we all want to stick around, but Hitch needs to sleep." He smiled at the others as he rose to his feet. One by one they patted the young soldiers' arm and headed for the door.

Every one of them took one last look before they ducked out and smiled at their continued good fortune. Hitch was already asleep.

End
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